

SEA-EU: THE ORIGINS

In September 2017, during his Sorbonne speech on the future of Europe, French President Emmanuel Macron called for the creation by 2024 of twenty European Universities, building *"a network of universities across Europe with programmes that have all their students study abroad and take classes in at least two languages. These European Universities will also be drivers of educational innovation and the quest for excellence."*

The European Commission proposed this initiative to European Union leaders ahead of the Gothenburg Social Summit in November 2017. In the conclusions adopted in the Council of Ministers meeting on 14 December 2017 in Brussels, Member States, the Council and the Commission, in line with their respective competences, were called upon by the Council to take work forward with a view to *"strengthening strategic partnerships across the EU between higher education institutions and encouraging the emergence by 2024 of some twenty 'European Universities, consisting in bottom-up networks of universities across the EU which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities"*.

In this context, the former Rector of the University of Cadiz (UCA, Spain), Prof. Eduardo González-Mazo, recruited Prof. José A. Muñoz-Cueto as Rector's Delegate in May 2018 and gave him the mandate of launching an alliance of European universities to extend to Europe a successful regional model such as the International Campus of Excellence of the Sea (CEI·MAR). After ten months of intense work, the six partners that constituted the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU), i.e., the University of Cadiz (UCA, Spain, coordinator), the Université de Bretagne Occidentale (UBO, France), Kiel University (CAU, Germany), the University of Gdańsk (UG, Poland), the University of Split (UNIST, Croatia) and the University of Malta (UM, Malta), submitted a proposal that was one of the 17 selected alliances selected (over 54 applications) on June 2019 by the European Commission in the first call of the European Universities Initiative.



Photo 1: The former Rector of UCA and the General Coordinator of SEA-EU in the press conference on 26 June 2019, after the announcement of the European Commission of the results of the first pilot call for “European Universities”.

The first contacts to build what has now become known as the ‘European University of the Seas’ (SEA-EU) took place on 22 June 2018, when a delegation composed by Prof. José A. Muñoz-Cueto, and Prof. Fidel Echevarría, Director of the International Doctoral School in Marine Studies at UCA, visited the Université de Bretagne Occidentale (UBO, Brest, France) presided by Rector Prof. Matthieu Gallou. They were received by a delegation composed by Prof. Yves-Marie Paulet, Vice-President in charge of Maritime Affairs, Prof. Béatrice Thomas-Tual, Vice-Rector for Europe and International Relations, and Prof. Christian Brosseau, Vice-Rector for Research and Innovation, and discussed the possibility to work together in the establishment of an alliance of coastal universities across various European countries, and apply together to the first call of the European Universities Initiative, due in 2019. It should be noted that, in addition to their common marine/maritime specialization, UCA and UBO have a long history of more than 30 years of successful academic collaboration, and that Cadiz and Brest have been twinned cities since 1986.

From this moment, UCA and UBO established a round of contacts with other potential candidate universities to join the consortium. By fulfilling its motto “*In mari via tua*” (The sea is your way), the University of Gdańsk (UG, Poland) strives towards the development of the Pomeranian region, whose greatest asset is indeed the sea. On 5 July 2018, Prof. José A. Muñoz-Cueto visited the University of Gdańsk, chaired by the Rector, Prof. Jerzy

Piotr Gwizdała, and met Prof. Piotr Stepnowski, Vice-Rector for Research and International Cooperation, Prof. Mariusz Sapota, Director of the Institute of Oceanography of Gdańsk, Dr. Adam Jagiełło-Rusiłowski, Head of the International Office and Dr. Ewa Szymczak, Deputy Dean for Education at the Faculty of Oceanography and Geography at UG. In this meeting, UG representatives expressed their intention and willingness to participate in this joint initiative.

On 10 September 2018, some members of UCA and UBO delegations went to Brussels and met with Vanessa Debiais-Sainton, Head of the Higher Education Unit of the European Commission (DG EACEA). The exchanges were highly constructive, fruitful and encouraging, and the delegation was able to transmit and explain their strategy to the Commission: the marine/maritime was to be the driving force and focal point of the alliance, which would be geographically balanced, with partners from West and East, North and South Europe, and with the involvement of large and small European states. Admittedly, the driving force of the proposed alliance was the common interest and expertise in marine/maritime disciplines of the partner universities; but the aim was to go beyond this, and draw up an interdisciplinary proposal involving Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Engineering, Humanities and Health Sciences, and fostering in the long-term a networking of the universities as a whole.

The insularity of Malta and its important geopolitical position in the Mediterranean region, its maritime-related cultural heritage, the undergraduate and postgraduate teaching offer and the research activity developed in marine/maritime disciplines at different Faculties and Institutes of the University of Malta (UM), made this university an excellent partner candidate to join the growing consortium. Thus, the Spanish and French core group contacted Prof. Alfred Vella, Rector of UM, and visited Malta on 15 October 2018 to meet Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino, Pro-Rector for International Development and Quality Assurance, Prof. Aldo Drago, specialist in Marine Oceanography, Prof. Claire de Marco, leader of the Maritime Cluster and Victoria Gauci, Acting Deputy Director of the International Office at UM. From the first contact, the UM representatives manifested their commitment and enthusiasm to the alliance and their availability to work side by side with other partners in the preparation of a successful proposal.

The focus of an important part of education and research in oceanography and fishing, island and coastal economy, Adriatic tourism, maritime law, nautical science, naval architecture, and a range of other specific disciplines related to their strong Adriatic/Mediterranean orientation, were considered important reasons to incorporate the University of Split (UNIST, Croatia) in this exciting adventure. After some email communications, a Spanish, French and Polish delegation represented by Jose A. Muñoz-Cueto (UCA), Fidel Echevarría (UCA), Beatrice Thomas-Tual (UBO), Piotr Stepnowski (UG) and Kamila Chomicz Sokołowska, Head of the International Cooperation Office (UG) conducted a visit to the University of Split (UNIST, Croatia) on 22 October 2018. This delegation exchanged their views on this initiative with the Governing Board of UNIST, represented by its Rector, Prof. Dragan Ljutić, Prof. Đurđica Miletić, Vice-Rector for International Cooperation, Prof. Leandra Vranješ Markić, Vice-Rector for Science and Innovation, Prof. Tomislav Kilić, Vice-Rector for Business Administration, Prof. Goran Kardum, Vice-Rector for Education and Prof. Željko Radić, Vice-Rector for Administration and Development of Human Resources. After a presentation of UCA, UBO, UG, UM and

UNIST, these universities discussed their common strategy and application to the European Universities Initiative, which the University of Split was willing to join from these first contacts.

Kiel University (CAU, Germany) is dedicated to research-based teaching and learning, and marine science represents one of its four dynamic priority research areas. The Future Ocean Network is an association of CAU researchers, centred at the Kiel Marine Science (KMS), who as successors to the "Future Ocean" Cluster of Excellence, are jointly implementing research projects that contribute to the sustainable use of ocean resources on an interdisciplinary and cross-institutional basis. Contacted by UBO, which already had a strong relationship with CAU through the Erasmus+ programme, but also because Brest and Kiel are twinned cities, CAU was the sixth and last partner to join the European University of the Seas.

Following the launch of the European Universities Initiative under the 2019 Erasmus+ call, in October 2018, the European University of the Seas started preparing the submission of its SEA-EU proposal. The first meeting of the Alliance took place in Paris (5 November, 2018) and then in Brussels (6-7 November, 2018).

On 18 December 2018, an information session on European Universities was held in Brussels organized by the Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture and the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).



Photo 2: The SEA-EU delegation at the EACEA informative meeting on European Universities held in Brussels on 18 December 2018.

After that, a consortium meeting took place in Brussels on 18 and 19 December 2018, with 17 participants from the University of Cadiz, Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Kiel University, University of Gdańsk, University of Split and University of Malta. In these sessions, the contents of Work Packages (WPs) were discussed and precisely defined, and the distribution of responsibilities, collaborations between partners in the development of WPs and division of work for the writing of different parts of the proposal were agreed, as well as the budget distribution. The consortium met Wim Gabriels, as representative of ESN in Brussels, and proposed that ESN should join the project as associated partner, through the participation of local ESN committees from each university. On 19 December 2018, the six partners signed the *Declaration Paper on the Establishment of the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU)* in Brussels.



Photo 3: Signature of the Declaration Paper on the Establishment of the European University of the Seas (SEA-EU) in Brussels on 19 December 2018.

A final preparatory meeting was held on 24-25 January 2019 in Cadiz (Spain) as coordinating institution, chaired by the former Rector of UCA, Prof. Eduardo González-Mazo, permitting the six partner universities to share their final reflections and work in the last steps of the proposal. The meeting also included the first formal participation of students in the deliberations of the alliance. SEA-EU, from its beginnings, has recognised the pivotal role that students play in its governance, execution and eventual success.



Photo 4: Final preparatory meeting of the SEA-EU proposal held on 24-25 January 2019 in Cadiz

The call for proposals closed on 28 February 2019 at 12:00 (noon, Brussels time). The results of the 2019 call were published on 26 June 2019. The EACEA received 54 eligible applications for this call, and the first 17 European University alliances involving 114 higher education institutions from 24 Member States were selected, based on the recommendations of an Evaluation Committee assisted by external experts. One of the Alliances selected was the ‘European University of the Seas’ (SEA-EU), and after the signature of the Grant Agreement, this exciting project started its journey on 1st October 2019. The kick-off meeting of SEA-EU was celebrated in Cadiz on 18-20 November 2019. A second round followed in June 2020, where a further 24 ‘European university’ alliances were selected, bringing the grand total to 41 alliances.



Photo 5: Kick-off meeting of the SEA-EU project celebrated in Cadiz on 18-19 November 2019.

Our journey so far has been exciting, although with its own challenges. No one could have foreseen the devastating effect of the coronavirus pandemic on our daily lives, and particularly on the operation of universities. Countries have suffered lockdowns, health systems placed under acute pressure, and individual citizens forced to change and adapt

their behaviour to minimise the transmission of the virus. The teaching and learning efforts of European universities have been forced to migrate on-line or to virtual teaching platforms, as well as the meetings; while travel and mobility, by students and staff, has ground to a halt. However, the enthusiasm remains unaltered and the alliance has reacted quickly to adapt to these contingencies, in the hope of recovering the face-to-face activities and cruise speed as soon as possible.